Article

Storytelling in a digital age: digital storytelling as an emerging narrative method for preserving and promoting indigenous oral wisdom

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Abstract

This article outlines the methodological process of a transdisciplinary team of indigenous and nonindigenous individuals, who came together in early 2009 to develop a digital narrative method to engage a remote community in northern Labrador in a research project examining the linkages between climate change and physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. Desiring to find a method that was locally appropriate and resonant with the narrative wisdom of the community, yet cognizant of the limitations of interview-based narrative research, our team sought to discover an indigenous method that united the digital media with storytelling. Using a case study that illustrates the usage of digital storytelling within an indigenous community, this article will share how digital storytelling can stand as a community-driven methodological

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strategy that addresses, and moves beyond, the limitations of narrative research and the issues of colonization of research and the Western analytic project. In so doing, this emerging method can preserve and promote indigenous oral wisdom, while engaging community members, developing capacities, and celebrating myriad stories, lived experiences, and lifeworlds.

Keywords

> *When I was a child growing up, we had lots of fun in the snow, dragging our sleds behind us, and finally getting to the top of our roof. It seemed like an eternity to get there. We would slide down off our roofs into deep snow. When we got tired of playing with our sleds, we would build huge snow tunnels. Our tunnels would be big enough to fit five or six of our friends in it. We would play for hours and hours at a time. I clearly remember when everyone in Rigolet used to put on the warmest winter clothes and put on our skates to go out on the cove to play hockey and figure skate. Them days was good. We had lots and lots of snow and ice to play with.*

> *Today I am a coordinator for the digital storytelling project that is funded through Health Canada. It has to do with how climate change is affecting our overall health, as well as our traditional hunting, fishing, and trapping. I never thought about climate change before until I started my job. One day, while my [workshop] group was brainstorming about climate change, they asked me, 'How will it be in Rigolet if the temperature gets 10 degrees hotter in about 50 years from now?' Everything began running through my mind. I wondered: would my future grandchildren be able to go out playing in the snow like I did when I was small? Would they be able to make snow tunnels or even enjoy the feeling of wind blowing around in their hair while they is skating on the ice with their friends? I realized that they would definitely not be able to do the things that I did during the winter, because they will not have any snow or ice. I will not be able to show my grandchildren how to hunt white partridges, or to take them ice fishing, or even travel to our cabins any more. And it won't just affect our winter months, there will also be no more annual berry picking because they will burn up from the sun.*

> *I was thinking of how and even what can we do to stop global warming. I determined that there was nothing that could be done. Or if there was, what is it? Time is everything, and I don't think we have too much of that left. I believe it needs to be addressed immediately, or our whole way of living will cease to exist. And I wonder: will we even exist?*

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Digital Storytelling Script

Tanya Pottle, Rigolet Resident and Former Digital Storytelling Coordinator[1]

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Introduction: the future of narrative research is … now?

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, 2008), we are currently enmeshed in the eighth movement—'the future'—of qualitative research. This stage represents the evolution of

qualitative methodological thought and builds from the foundational understanding that qualitative research studies 'the value-laden nature of inquiry', while emphasizing 'how social experience is created and given meaning'. In so doing, qualitative methods aim to understand the 'socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape reality' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 10).

This 'future' moment, this present time, has seen a burgeoning of innovative research methods that focus on community participation, capacity development, social justice, and the decolonizing of research, knowledge, and method. In particular, this movement in qualitative research has witnessed an increasing amount of research activity and writing around indigenous methods, particularly from indigenous scholars (Bishop, 1998, 2005; Cram, 1993; Pidgeon and Hardy, 2002; Smith, 1999, 2005), for there is the awareness in the field that 'from the vantage point of the colonized … the term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, "research", is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous vocabulary' (Smith, 1999: 1). For scholars working in this field, research conducted within an indigenous context requires an understanding of the myriad and overlapping ways in which the pursuit of research is a project full of power dynamics, colonization, knowledge appropriation, and the recognition that 'the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices' (Smith, 1999: 2). As such, one of the main foci of the '8th movement' is the dedication to decolonizing research, knowledge, and methods, both from indigenous scholars conducting their own research and writing from with/in indigenous positions and cultures, and from nonindigenous researchers working in partnership with indigenous individuals, communities, organizations, and governments.

This process of 'decolonizing research', Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) argued,

> Is not simply about challenging or making refinements to qualitative research. It is a much broader but still purposeful agenda for transforming the institution of research, the deep underlying structures and taken-for-granted ways of organizing, conducting, and disseminating research and knowledge. (p. 88)

Connected to this decolonizing project is the need for methods that not only work to deconstruct power dynamics between researchers and researched and indigenous and nonindigenous but also are respectful of and resonant with the rich oral histories and cultural practices of indigenous communities. Narrative- and story-based methods are particularly beneficial and respectful strategies for engaging in research with indigenous communities and in indigenous contexts. Indeed, 'narrative research', Hendry (2007) explains, 'has been characterized as providing a method for sharing stories, giving voice to those traditionally marginalized, and providing a less exploitative research method than other modes' (p. 489). Yet, if not used carefully, and with great sensitivity, narrative research—particularly within historically silenced or marginalized communities—can be used to reify, objectify, essentialize, and/or further marginalize individuals and communities (Hendry, 2007); as a result, some narrative methods are in danger of becoming strategies that allow nonindigenous researchers to say what they want to say in a

particular context, rather than really listening to what is being said. Indeed, when conducting narrative-based interviews and

> listening to stories we are often engaged in a dual conversation. One conversation with the interviewed and one in our own head where we are constantly engaging in a meta-analysis of the story. What is really going on here? What is the meaning? How might I get more? What am I missing? We are in a state of doubt in relation to our interviewee. Our stance is one of distrust. So busy capturing 'experience' that we can't listen. We have so many strategies for 'getting it right' that the real experience is obscured. (Hendry, 2007: 494)

When this dual conversation translates into the analytical process, there is a danger of creating even further distance between the interviewer and the storyteller, and at times, the analysis and interpretation of research results can even be 'an act of colonization, of violence' (Hendry, 2007: 493).

Despite these concerns about narrative research, our team still felt that there was great importance to engaging people through stories and respecting the stories of others, and we held the position that narratives had the potential to illuminate lifeways and lifeworlds of those telling the stories. Mindful of the possibilities and pitfalls of narrative research, our team endeavored to find an approach that was respectful and resonant with the oral storytelling history of indigenous populations, and was also a strategy that had the potential to move away from some of the challenges of interview-based narrative research toward a new way of *participant-created* story-centered narratives. We looked for another approach, which was still founded in storytelling and oral wisdom, but worked to alleviate issues in representation, objectification, reification, colonization, and violence. As such, we found our way to digital storytelling, which we believe can sit at the nexus of research, community engagement, and narrative. In so doing, this approach is an important addition to indigenous methods and strategies when conducting indigenous-led research projects and/or when working in partnership with indigenous communities, as well as to the oeuvre of qualitative methods. Using a case study that illustrates the usage of digital storytelling within an Inuit community, this article will demonstrate how digital storytelling can be a participant-led and participant-created story-based data-gathering strategy, which begins to address the limitations of interview-based narrative research, the issues of colonization of research, and the Western analytic project; it is also a strategy that simultaneously understands the need for indigenous communities to take control of the research process and to create their own research platforms, in their own voices, sharing their myriad, rich, and nuanced lived experiences.

Background and context

The Changing Climate, Changing Health, Changing Stories project

This case study was conducted in the Inuit community of Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Labrador, Canada (population: approximately 269), through the *Changing Climate, Changing Health, Changing Stories* project, a multiyear, community-driven research project dedicated to examining the impacts of climate change on health and well-being. Rigolet is the

southernmost Inuit community in the world and is one of the five communities that make up the region of Nunatsiavut ('Our Beautiful Land'), along with Nain, Hopedale, Postville, and Makkovik. The Nunatsiavut Inuit represent approximately 5500 of the approximately 55,000 Inuit living in 53 communities spread throughout Nunatsiavut and the other three Inuit regions of Canada: the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, and Nunavik. As with many indigenous populations, the Inuit continue to live lifestyles closely tied to and reliant upon the natural environment and have a deep and rich history and culture premised on oral storytelling.

In 2009, the Rigolet Inuit Community Government was awarded funding from Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch to bring together a transdisciplinary team of indigenous and nonindigenous researchers to (a) examine the impacts of climate change on physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and (b) pilot the use of digital storytelling as a narrative-based data-gathering method, centered on sharing first-person narratives and lived experiences through the digital format. In particular, our team was interested in studying the potential of digital storytelling to produce tangible outcomes that the participants considered valuable and that could stand as rich sources of qualitative data.

Digital storytelling: an emerging method for indigenous narrative research

Through this project, our team was engaged in a quest to negotiate the tricky, complex, and ever-changing space between research methodology, methods, participants, and researchers, in order to decolonize data-gathering practices and to engage communities and community members in the research process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 2005). For our project, 'method' became extremely important because we understood that 'it is regarded as the way in which knowledge is acquired or discovered, and as the way in which we can know what is real' (Smith, 1999: 164). As a transdisciplinary team of indigenous and nonindigenous members, we were searching for a method that reflected, preserved, and promoted the culture, histories, and narratives of the community, as well as complemented and informed the more standard qualitative strategies we were using (focus groups, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires), for we were also mindful that from an indigenous research perspective, these other method forms may serve 'as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, and for truth' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008: 4). Working within the framework of the connection between climatic and environmental change and human health and well-being, we also understood that oral stories could greatly enhance research about environment–health relations, and could complement data gathered from other sources and methods. Indeed, our team argued that place-based narratives and first-hand observations and experiences of environmental change and climatic variation, shared through oral stories, are not only an important and legitimate source of research but also are methodologically rich and powerful (Abram, 1996; Briggs, 2005; Burgess, 1999; Chamberlin, 2003; Cruikshank, 2005; Davis, 2004; Dove, 2000; Durie, 2004; Ellen and Harris, 2000; Furgal et al., 2002a, 2002b; Laidler, 2006; Mauro and Hardison, 2000; Raffles, 2002; Robertson et al., 2000; Ross, 2008; Stevenson, 1998, 2005; Watson et al., 2003). From these research positions, and cognizant of the narrative work being conducted using newly emerging digital

technologies to document and promote first-person narratives in a fluid and virtual form, our team decided to utilize the process of digital storytelling as a narrative research method.

The digital storytelling process[2]

Digital storytelling is the process of illustrating personal narratives and stories with photographs, artwork, music, voice-overlay, video clips, and text—a first-person mini-movie of sorts. These stories are created during immersive workshops, where participants develop and share stories through group story circles, reading and/or telling their stories aloud to participants to share experiences and to receive feedback. Through this experience, the emphasis of the workshops and of the peer feedback is on the development and sharing of personal stories, emphasizing the transformative opportunities inherent in this process. Digital storytelling is, therefore, a way to celebrate the individual and the collective, and to lend respect and credence to the lived experiences of individuals through the collective co-creation of individual narratives, and provides participants with the opportunity to work together, tell and share stories, listen to others, and learn. In addition, by uniting the finished stories together, a rich, detailed, and nuanced tapestry of voices emerge providing context and depth to localized narratives and collective experiences.

Throughout the week-long digital storytelling workshops in Rigolet, participants worked under the guidance of trained community members and digital storytelling facilitators. In an attempt not to influence the stories created, the nonindigenous project researchers purposefully chose not to receive training in the digital storytelling facilitation process. In addition to the story writing and/or telling, participants also learned skills in computer software, story design, video editing, and production techniques, in order to create, edit, and produce their own short video. During the workshops, participants were also asked to bring in photographs to be scanned, digital photos, artwork, and music, which illustrated the story. At the end of each workshop, all participants gathered to screen their stories—with evident pride, anticipation, and excitement—and to view the stories created by their fellow workshop participants.

Since the digital storytelling workshops were associated with a larger research project focused on climate change and health effects, there was an emphasis on sharing stories about how changes in the land, sea, ice, and snow were impacting livelihoods, health, and well-being in the community. As such, group brainstorming sessions were used at the beginning of each workshop—facilitated by the trained community members—where participants were asked to share their reflections, experiences, and thoughts about these changes and subsequent impacts. These ideas and comments were depicted in large concept maps using chalkboards, to provide a visual representation of the group discussion, as well as to inform the research component of the project. This aspect fueled and inspired several stories, as well as sparked further dialogue among the participants around topics such as land-based stories, the effects of changing climatic conditions on cultural activities, and current and potential adaptation strategies.

As of September 2012, 37 stories from Rigolet have been created during six week-long workshops, and several one-on-one workshops. These stories have been united on two

community-produced DVDs in 2010 and 2012, which were given free to all workshop participants and all households in Rigolet, as well as distributed to policy makers, health professionals, project stakeholders, and at national and international conferences and meetings. There have also been six team stories (created through a pairing of a youth and an Elder) during a Nunatsiavut-wide youth and Elder storytelling camp. These stories have also been screened in many contexts: at a variety of community events and story nights, for government representatives and health officials in Nunatsiavut and other parts of Labrador, at national and international conferences, and in a variety of educational activities in elementary, secondary, and tertiary settings. Given the fluidity of the digital form, these stories have also been posted to the Rigolet community website (www.rigolet.ca), a YouTube™ Channel created for the project, and a Facebook© page.[3] Recognizing the importance of this method, the Rigolet Inuit Community Government has established the 'My Word': Storytelling and Digital Media Lab, creating the first northern Canadian center for digital media and community-engaged research and capacity development—Inuit research and facilitation by and for Inuit.

It's 'My Word': participant responses and experiences

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) wrote, 'An important task of indigenous research in "becoming" a community of researchers is about capacity building, developing and mentoring researchers, and creating the space and support for new approaches to research and new examinations of indigenous research' (p. 92). As we moved through piloting this approach in Rigolet, we engaged the participants (n = 26) in interviews about their perceptions not only of the digital storytelling process itself but also of the actual stories created, to discover whether participants found this approach valuable or useful, and whether it created 'new approaches to research and new examinations of indigenous research' (p. 92). In addition, we also interviewed a number of individuals who had not created digital stories but who had attended story nights or viewed the created stories (n = 10). Through these results, it became clear that from the interviewees' perspective, the process of digital storytelling dovetails, overlaps, and complements several of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) interconnected and overlapping 'indigenous projects': storytelling, creating, remembering, connecting, sharing, representing, networking, and intervening. As such, we use these categories to share and frame key responses from participants, surrounding the use of this method within the community of Rigolet, and to examine the ways in which digital storytelling can address some of the limitations of interview-based narrative research.

Storytelling

As we have mentioned above, the Inuit have a strong oral history, premised on the telling and sharing of stories. These stories form the cultural, mythological, and historical fabric to daily life. Storytelling is also a powerful and essential component of any indigenous-based research, and should be respected as a way of sharing lived experiences, exploring personal beliefs and values, and discovering place-based wisdom. It is a way to link individual stories and community narratives, while inciting and eliciting dialogue between and among diverse peoples and groups (Smith, 1999). For our participants, the

unification of storytelling and the digital media provided the opportunity to share their own stories, and give voice to ideas and experiences not previously spoken or shared through other research methods, such as interviews and focus groups. As one participant explained, '[I felt] very emotional, because like I never share my stories with anybody … like about my childhood and stuff. Only with really close friends, but not strangers. … It felt good. It felt really good!' The participants also explained that digital storytelling made it possible to interact with the stories of others through a shareable form of digital media. As one of our participants reminded us, 'Everyone got a story. Everyone. Some of them real good stories!'

Creating

At its foundation, the digital storytelling process is centered on creation and the act of creating. For Smith (1999), the project of creating 'fosters inventions and discoveries, facilitates simple improvements to people's lives and uplifts … spirits' (p. 158). In so doing, this creation project should be dedicated to 'channeling collective creativity, in order to produce solutions to indigenous problems'. When united with storytelling, 'creating' provides the moment and the opportunity for individuals to document ideas and lived experiences. Indeed, for participants, the creation process inherent within the digital story method 'was good. It was really good because I wanted to share the memories [and stories] with everybody'. This creation of digital first-person narratives also provided the opportunity and the platform to explore and share personal ideas, experiences, and beliefs, which as many participants indicated, was a powerful form of catharsis and elicited feelings of elation, joy, pride, and release when the creative process was completed.

Remembering

As one of Smith's (1999) projects, 'remembering' is about connecting to a past and bringing the history of communities into the present moment. More than that, it is about remembering all moments from the collective fabric, including pain and trauma, and people's responses to these moments. It is not meant to idealize history but rather to remember, accept, and celebrate its highs and lows. As one participant remarked about her digital story, 'We are going to sad places, but we are finding new ways through this'. Thus, one of the key points of remembering is that 'healing and transformation become crucial strategies in any approach that asks a community to remember what they may have decided to unconsciously or consciously to forget' (Smith, 1999: 146). Digital storytelling dovetails with remembering because it allows individuals and communities to remember through the process of story creation and through story circles, while simultaneously preserving these stories for future generation, sharing the stories beyond the community, and promoting the indigenous voice:

> We have been saying for years and years that we need to start recording these stories and what's going on, or else they are going to be lost. Especially when the Elders start to die, what they know is not recorded and a lot of the younger people don't listen to their stories anymore, so

once they die it's going to be lost if it's not recorded and kept. So to me, it's history being saved, really.

For the digital storytelling participants in our project, and as one community member shared, this form of community-created media allows communities to 'preserve its story and its history'—whether painful and traumatic, joyous and triumphant, or personal and meaningful stories—which 'could have been lost if they weren't told'.

Connecting

Connectedness carries incredible importance for indigenous communities and 'positions individuals in sets of relationships with other people and with the environment' (Smith, 1999: 148). This connection ranges from respecting and representing creation stories, to making linkages with familial and ancestral histories. When working within an indigenous context, it is important that research methods and resultant activities connect with the indigenous communities in a respectful and enhancing manner. As with oral storytelling and remembering, digital storytelling provides the platform for people to not only to remember their roots, but also to connect to themselves, their histories, their ancestors, and their culture through stories and video. These stories can be shared between and among community members, as well as with other communities and audiences nationally and internationally. As one of the digital story creators explained, digital stories can stand as culturally relevant documentation and testimonial about individual and collective ideas, events, and experiences, because

> You can listen to the person who is telling them. You can meet them. You can go up and say like, 'Oh I like your story. You tell it really well!' or whatever. As opposed to a poster, where you're just looking at a picture and reading words. You can hear the emotions in the voice. … just to hear their voice, you can tell just what kind of emotion they're going through when they're telling the story, and how they feel.

This ability to hear the voices, listen to the words, and see pictures of and from the participants provides an avenue of connecting to people, places, and lifeworlds beyond one's self, and to learn about other perspectives and values of people, place, and culture.

Sharing

Building on storytelling, creating, remembering, and connecting is sharing. As an indigenous project, 'sharing' represents creating networks between and among indigenous people throughout the world. Sharing 'is a form of oral literacy, which connects with the storytelling and formal occasions that feature in indigenous life' (Smith, 1999: 161). Digital storytelling intersects with and complements this project by making it possible to share these stories on websites, social networking sites, via email, and on DVDs. As one participant explained, with digital storytelling, 'people don't have to go somewhere and talk. They just show the people stories, put it on a screen, and everyone can see it, instead of just people in their town seeing it'. In addition, these stories also allow the creator to

share a wealth of complex relationships and experiences by transporting viewers into the story through voice, pictures, and sound.

Representing

As an area of Smith's (1999) indigenous inquiry, representing and self-representation is a 'fundamental right', and 'spans both the notion of representation as a political concept and representation as a form of voice and expression' (Smith, 1999: 150). Digital storytelling provides the platform for people to tell their own stories, in their own words, in the manner in which they want others to hear it. As a method for research and community engagement, digital stories share a wealth of complex and interrelated information in a way that is both personal and authentic. These stories are culturally relevant documentation and testimonial about individual and collective ideas, events, and experiences. As an interviewee explained, through digital stories you can learn about people in other places because

> you can see their way of life, eh? See how they hunt and fish. See how things are changing … Lot quicker than reading a book, eh? A lot better, I say. You sees the pictures, and tells your own story.

Networking

Within the context of indigenous research, there needs to be an appreciation for, and emphasis on, networking between and among individuals and communities, regionally, territorially, provincially, nationally, and internationally. These opportunities for networking are based on relationships and trust, which builds from listening to the stories of others, and connecting with others through the sharing of our own stories. For Smith (1999), 'networking is a process which indigenous peoples have used effectively to build relationships and disseminate knowledge and information' (p. 157). Digital storytelling provides the digital media platform to enhance this networking process, for its very form allows it to be shared quickly and easily between and among indigenous communities, as well as with policy makers, government representatives, organizations, and researchers. With digital storytelling, you can make a personal connection and strengthen a network through seeing a face, hearing a voice, and viewing significant photographs. As a participant explained, 'when you listen to their story it makes you understand like they felt that way and that's how they feels and stuff'.

Intervening

Finally, digital storytelling also fits with the project of intervening, for with this type of method, the community

> itself invites the project in and sets out its parameters. The various departments and agencies involved in such a project are also expected to be willing to change themselves in some way,

redirect policy, design new programmes or train staff differently. Intervening is directed then at changing institutions which deal with indigenous peoples and not at changing indigenous peoples to fit the structures. (Smith, 1999: 147)

Through its very form, digital storytelling transforms the research process, and requires that the roles of 'researcher' and 'researched' begin to change. This process requires a level of trust between the research team and the communities—a trust that enhances the partnership and the project. As an indigenous health professional working in the region shared after viewing the digital stories created in Rigolet, 'I am impressed that the community gave permission for you to use the stories because they are very personal. That is an indication that you have got the relationship at a point where you have that trust'.

Indigenous projects summary: opportunities and possibilities

Digital storytelling allows numerous complex and interrelated themes to be shared, narratively and personally, in a short and engaging segment. To illustrate further, consider the transcript from the voice-overlay of Tanya Pottle's digital story shared at the beginning of this article; through this story, we see themes of cultural practices and history, memory, family and friends, and climatic change and variation, as well as distress and anxiety about how changes in snow, ice, and temperature will alter life for her children and grandchildren, as well as her community. The final question, 'Will we even exist?' stands as a personal reminder to researchers, policy makers, and government that beyond the numbers and data, there are people who are directly affected by environmental changes. This brief narrative brings together all Smith's indigenous projects discussed above, but more importantly, transports the viewer/listener, however momentarily, into a world full of culture, feeling, heritage, and history, in a way that is simply not possible through other methods. As one of our participants shared, the information, images, and stories shared within the digital stories are

> something that [researchers] wouldn't see if they didn't watch it. They wouldn't know if they didn't see it, so it's definitely something that [researchers] should watch if they're doing research in that category so they'd actually know how people feels about stuff. … you can watch it and see it.

While we have explored the ways in which digital storytelling intersects and overlaps with eight of Smith's indigenous projects, we also see the potential for digital storytelling, as an indigenous method, to work within the projects of testimonies, celebrating survival, indigenizing, revitalizing, gendering, envisioning, reframing, restoring, returning, democratizing, protecting, and discovering (Smith, 1999: 161). While this may seem a rather lofty and ambitious claim that one method could fit within those (and many other) indigenous-led areas of inquiry, given the creative process that drives digital storytelling and the myriad themes and topics that can be explored as first-person narratives, there truly is a great deal of potential in use and application. The projects listed above are

not meant to be a definitive or limiting list of what digital storytelling can and cannot accomplish as a method; however, they are certainly meant to illustrate the ability of this process to act as a method that engages individuals and communities working toward the decolonization of research methods.

Analytically, these indigenous projects are also helpful in framing the examination of the stories as individual units and as a collective whole. As researchers, the stories themselves stand as rich, nuanced, culturally based, and locally appropriate narrative 'data' (although they are much more than simply data). As a method that puts the participant story and lived experience first, and that allows researchers to analyze the stories only after they have been created and does not include the researchers until the stories are finalized and produced, digital storytelling has the potential to become a narrative method that is a more participatory and democratic form of social research, premised on sharing and illuminating the lived experiences of individuals through a fluid, transferable, and digital format.

Digital storytelling also complements many other research methods, from interviews and focus groups, to questionnaires and more quantitative approaches to data gathering. From our research experience, we found that people were much more apt to share more personal and emotional experiences through digital stories, rather than the interviews and focus groups. Without digital stories as part of the methods utilized, a powerful and meaningful aspect of lived experiences would have been absent from our results. Finally, it is important to note that these stories can and should be analyzed from numerous additional perspectives, and from our experiences, would be particularly valuable to critical methods seeking to situate the stories within historical, political, racial, socioeconomic, and gendered perspectives.

Lessons learned

When undertaking this type of research and working with an emerging method, there are inevitably unexpected and unanticipated moments and outcomes. One of the first issues we encountered was around access to technological resources, and the use of this technology to create, edit, and produce the digital stories. In many indigenous communities, access to funds to purchase technological resources is often difficult to obtain. As such, a significant portion of the grant money was used to purchase all needed digital equipment—laptop computers, digital cameras, digital video recorders, computer and editing software, printer, scanner, and traveling cases—in order to create a technology resource library in Rigolet, as well as a traveling media lab, which could be brought to other communities. By investing in physical resources, which would remain within the community for community use, the project was able to create a mobile digital media center[4] and to set-up the foundations for a lasting technological impact. This highlights the importance of ensuring that all needed equipment and technologies not only be purchased to conduct the workshops but also be available after the completion of the project, so that technological capacities can be built and the community can benefit from this investment in the years to come.

Connected to the access to technology is the ability to use it. For some individuals in the community, particularly Elders, the needed skills and level of comfort to create, edit,

and produce their digital story were not yet developed nor was there necessarily significant interest in developing these skills. While the workshops did not require any previous experience with computers, digital cameras, or software, we found that individuals who were already using and/or comfortable with this type of equipment were more apt to participate. To alleviate this issue, our community digital storytelling facilitators used various techniques to engage participants, from working one-on-one with Elders to record their stories and assist with the technology, to recording oral histories, to co-editing the stories with the participants. We are also aware that in some indigenous communities, the recording of a voice or the creation of a video may not always be appropriate and/or desirable. While we did not encounter this situation in our own research—and indeed found that people of all ages found this an excellent platform to unite oral storytelling with newly emerging digital technology—it is important to ensure that all participants and the community are comfortable with audio and video recordings and an understanding of their expected use.

Another unanticipated yet very significant issue we encountered was around the use of a not-for-profit organization to facilitate the first sets of workshops in the community, while simultaneously training the community facilitators. While the organization provided an essential service to the project, in hindsight, it would have been more effective if the community members had been trained in the digital storytelling process and techniques before the first workshops. Training prior to the beginning of the community workshops would have allowed all the workshops to be facilitated by the newly trained community members and would have established the workshops in the community as solely community run. In addition, by having the community digital storytelling facilitators trained and ready to coordinate workshops from the beginning, the adjustments and modifications that evolved as the project continued to meet the local needs and nuances would have emerged in a more immediate and organic manner. This process would have also further removed any nonindigenous influences and/or underlying values and assumptions that implicitly or explicitly impacted the story content, design, or structures.[5]

In addition, some unexpected challenges emerged around the types of stories that participants created. While the focus of the workshops was on the connections between climate change and human health in order to fit within the framework of the larger project, as the workshops evolved, several people felt the urgency of sharing personal trauma narratives (Colvin, 2008), centered around alcoholism and sexual assault in the community. For these individuals, the workshops and the process of creating these personal narratives were both empowering and healing, which we celebrated. From a project-specific research perspective, however, this created a challenge to 'meeting the mandates' of the larger project topic, and of trying to provide a topical framework to the creative story process. We quickly realized through the process that many people needed to share particular personal or traumatic stories first, before they were able to discuss other experiences more connected to the climate–health field. While we still believe there is great value in using digital storytelling as a community-engaged method for specific topics or themes, the facilitators and the researchers need to remain open to and respect the need that some participants will have to create stories beyond the workshop topic.

Our team also experienced unexpected personal and professional challenges around facilitating, witnessing, and engaging with these trauma narratives. Unexpectedly, the facilitators of these workshops became almost viewed as personal counselors, which was a role for which they were both unprepared and untrained. This highlighted the need for awareness of, and clear guidelines around, dealing with deep emotional issues that could emerge during such a process, as well as further training in participant referral for the community digital storytelling facilitators. To support this training, the community digital storytelling facilitators participated in a two-day intensive training session with mental health and addiction experts from the Nunatsiavut Government on topics such as sensitivity to individual and collective trauma, referring to professional services, and confidentiality. Self-care was also important, as bearing witness to the cathartic process of the storyteller and continually confronting the trauma through the stories themselves was a challenging and emotionally fraught process. This topic was also emphasized in the training from the mental health and addiction experts, and community facilitators continue to receive ongoing advice and mentorship about patient referral and self-care from health professionals in Nunatsiavut.

In hindsight, however, it would have been valuable for all members of the team to openly and regularly discuss issues of client support and referral and self-care, as well as to discuss ongoing strategies for working through the affective dimensions of qualitative research. Rager (2005) suggests that when engaging in emotionally laden research, 'journal writing, peer-debriefing, personal counseling, member checking [participant verification], and maintaining balance [in other nourishing life activities]' (p. 25) can all be extremely helpful to mitigate the effects of painful stories and research. Despite the inherent challenges in working with and through these emotions—our own and others—we believe that it is important to engage with these stories and to deeply value these emotional experiences in order to produce quality research and stories (c.f. Behar, 1996; Harris and Huntington, 2001; Rager, 2005; Sciarra, 1999).

Once the stories were created, and our team and the story creators were discussing when, how, and where to make the digital stories public, we were confronted with the 'burden of representation' (Fine et al., 2003: 169). Indeed, our team became acutely aware of the responsibility held by the community, the facilitators, and ourselves over story dissemination, as issues and questions around participant privacy and the potential for the perpetuation of stereotypes were foremost in our minds. The participants and our team were proud of the stories that were created. We were committed to sharing those voices and lived experiences with others. But we wanted to ensure that through sharing, and through subsequent research, we did not structure the stories to glamorize, pathologize, and/or neutralize the voices and lives of the Inuit. As Fine et al. (2003) explained, we were grappling with 'how best to represent the stories that may do more damage than good, depending on who consumes/exploits them' (p. 183).

Given this potential of digital stories to both give voice to often silenced stories or to lend fuel to damaging social representation (Fine et al., 2003), when using this method, it is critical to address a number of challenging and tricky personal and political questions: Which stories should or should not be made public through websites or DVDs? Does the project research team have the responsibility or the right to set parameters around what personal narratives can be created in these workshops? What message, or

narrative, do these types of digital stories tell about the community in which they were created? Do they further perpetuate stereotypes? Or give voice to silenced peoples and issues? Is it justified to consciously leave out stories that have the potential to be 'used against' the community? Will some stories contribute to collective misunderstandings? These questions are challenging, and fraught with tricky personal and political terrain. In many cases, we are still actively grappling with them. We have broached these topics openly with various community members, health professionals, academics, and other stakeholders, and our team continues to engage in dialogue around these complex issues. While there are no firm answers to these questions, we, like Fine at al. (2003), take the position that 'it is up to all of us to figure out how to say what needs to be said without jeopardizing individuals and feeding perverse social representations' (p. 184).

On a larger theoretical and methodological level, while digital storytelling provides the platform for individuals to share their personal stories and lived experiences, there is also a narrative structure that underlies the digital storytelling process. This narrative structure follows a very Western approach to storylines, which sees the story 'wrap up' neatly within 3–5 minutes. While this approach to creating digital stories is indeed pleasing to listen to and follow, it does not necessarily resonate with non-Western storytelling forms or traditions, which celebrate stories-in-process and do not require stories to conclude succinctly and fully by the end. This issue is currently being addressed by community digital storytelling facilitators, as they attempt to extend and challenge the boundaries of digital narratives, and seek to find alternative ways of sharing stories using the digital media.

Concluding thoughts … the future of narrative research is now?

'Methods are not passive strategies', Fine et al. (2003: 187) write, 'They produce, reveal, and enable the display of different kinds of identities' (p. 187). Our task and our responsibility as social science researchers, then, is to continue to search for and work with methods that 'produce, reveal, and enable' the voices, stories, and lived experiences of the participants in as unhindered and uninhibited manner as possible. Through our experiences piloting the use of digital storytelling as a narrative-based social science method, we believe that digital storytelling opens up some exciting and innovative new terrain for conducting and sharing narrative research, particularly within indigenous communities. As a method, it not only addresses the conceptual and practical issues and limitations associated with narrative research but it also works to alter, reverse, and/or disrupt the power dynamics often inherent in the research process and in the very roles of the 'researcher' and 'researched'. The stories created, and the voices and lived experiences within, are an important, rich, and powerful source of data that have not been written, prestructured, or altered by the researcher.

Digital storytelling, and the process involved in the creation of a personal video narrative, begins to dismantle the hyphen between 'researcher-researched' and 'teller-listener', and can place the researcher into the position of a 'listener', rather than a 'verifier' or an 'analyzer'. Digital storytelling removes the researcher from a position of 'narrative creator', and instead, places the power of creation with the individual

workshop participants. In this situation, the researcher is removed from the storytelling and facilitation process, and instead assumes the role of listener. This positioning is very different than the majority of the narrative research, where researchers become collectors, or gatherers, and then story re-creators (Hendry, 2007). Digital storytelling, then, allows the creator–tellers to share stories in the first person, which are entirely their own. While interpretations and analysis can certainly be made of these digital stories, the voices, experiences, and wisdom belong to the teller. And as viewer–listeners (or in some cases, researcher–listeners), we are tasked with the responsibility and the privilege of listening deeply and collaborating in the *communion* that occurs when sharing and bearing witness to stories (Hendry, 2007).

By placing the creative control with the community, and by providing a platform to tell and share one's own story while listening to the stories of others, digital storytelling 'can influence indigenous healthiness and resilience by offering a means of owning and being able to tell one's own story' (Gubrium, 2009: 187). Importantly, the digital stories created transcend the boundaries of research and academic institutions; the stories themselves move beyond merely a form of data to be analyzed (although they are indeed fruitful and fecund sites of analysis) and become digital narrative opportunities for individuals around the world to encounter the stories, voices, lives, and experiences of people with whom they may not otherwise interact or have contact.

When working with indigenous communities, research methods should first and foremost be about 'establishing, maintaining, and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relationships, not just among people as individuals, but also with people as individuals, as collectives, and as members of communities' (Smith, 2005: 97). It is within this understanding of, and commitment to engaging with people and communities, and situated within the '8th movement' of qualitative research, that social science and humanities researchers—indigenous or nonindigenous—can use research methods and methodologies as the opportunity to encourage critical dialogue and develop individual and collective capacities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). As a narrative-based participatory research method, a capacity-building strategy, a dialogue inciter, and a community collaboration and cohesion enhancer, digital storytelling is a powerful strategy for engaging individuals who have been historically silenced, marginalized, and/or tokenized. From our experience, these digital stories can provide rich, culturally relevant first-person visual and aural depictions of life: of triumphs and failures, fears and hopes, and laughter and pain. They open up worlds of affect and intimacy, and they share—through sound, pictures, voice, and video—a glimpse of another life, with whom we can commune through the platform of a digital narrative, with whom we can listen, and from whom we can learn.

As Munro Hendry (2007: 495) illustrated,

through telling our lives we engage in the act of meaning making. This is a sacred act. Stories are what makes us human. … We are our narratives. They are not something that can be outside ourselves because they are what give shape to us, what gives meaning.

Stories are the outpouring of lived experiences, are ever in process, and always, already embedded within deep sets of cultures, values, epistemologies, and ontologies. Digital

stories, then, can be understood as existing within this 'sacred' terrain of narrative, culture, and epistemic and ontological values, and, as such, perhaps the least we can 'do' with them—which may turn out to be the very most—is to listen, to learn, to reflect, and to trust.

We 'currently situate narrative within the metaphor of research', and in so doing, reduce narrative to 'methods, verification, validity, ways in which we as researchers can legitimate it as a means of research that tells of something about the world' (Hendry, 2007: 497). The process of digital storytelling, however, offers something different to the narrative research project, and may, in some sense, begin to dismantle the idea of research as a site of production, toward a process of research as a 'site of communion' (Hendry, 2007), particularly when working with/in an indigenous context, with indigenous partners and collaborators. Following Munro Hendry (2007), we suggest that narrative research 'is not ultimately about interpretation, but about faith. Trusting in the stories and the storyteller' (p. 494). Digital stories can provide us this opportunity for faith in individuals and their narratives, and, in so doing, create the opening to listen, reflect, learn, trust, and then listen again.

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Notes

1. To view this digital story in its entirety, as well as to see the pictures and hear the voice of the teller, please visit www.rigolet.ca, or www.youtube.com/user/uKautsiga
2. The digital storytelling process was first formalized by the Center for Digital Storytelling in California (www.storycenter.org). For more information about the digital storytelling process, and the organization of workshops, please see Lambert (2006) and Gubrium (2009).
3. To view a sample of the videos created through this project, please visit www.rigolet.ca or www.youtube.com/user/uKautsiga. It is important to note that Rigolet community members gave consent to have these videos posted, and that the social networking sites of YouTube™

and Facebook© were chosen by the storytellers as an appropriate platform for sharing because of their popularity, usage level, and ease of access throughout Rigolet and the North.

4. This mobile media center allows the 'My Word' Lab to travel to other communities within the region and across Canada to conduct digital storytelling workshops and to train other indigenous peoples in the digital storytelling process and methods.

5. It is important to note that pedagogically, there is a strong case to be made for training community facilitators through the process of co-facilitating workshops 'on-the-ground' in communities. This 'learning-by-doing' framework provides excellent experience and opportunities for the trainees, while simultaneously allowing for feedback from workshop participants and trainers. That said, differences can, at times, emerge when one group is from a nonindigenous setting. As such, our team was dedicated to training community members to do this work, which would then allow them to facilitate workshops and train other individuals throughout the Nunatsiavut region, as well as other Inuit and/or Northern communities. It is our hope that this community-driven process, reliant on community facilitators and wisdom, will help alleviate the 'insider–outsider'/indigenous–nonindigenous dichotomy that emerges in this type of work.

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'My Word': Storytelling and Digital Media Lab is located in Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Labrador, Canada, and is Canada's first northern indigenous-created and indigenous-run center dedicated to using digital media technology and video to engage community members in research and cultural preservation and promotion (www.rigolet.ca). Created through the *Changing Climate, Changing Health, Changing Stories* project, the lab is currently staffed by Marilyn Baikie and Inez Shiwak.

Rigolet Inuit Community Government is the governing body of the Town of Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Labrador, Canada, and oversaw the *Changing Climate, Changing Health, Changing Stories* project and currently manages the *'My Word': Storytelling and Digital Media Lab*. The Rigolet Inuit Community Government is headed by Charlotte Wolfrey (AngajukKâk/mayor) and managed by Sarah Blake (Town Manager).